THE BIG IDEAS 💡

The Surge of Suffering
Caused by the Great Rewiring.

Kids Are Antifragile
Wish for the wind.

Cuckoos
Are crazy. Don't let them take over.

Spiritual Elevation
And degradation.

Collective Action
Let's take it. TOGETHER.

" My central claim in this book is that these two trends- overprotection in the real world and underproduction in the virtual world-are the major reasons why children born after 1995 became the anxious generation."

~ Jonathan Haidt

The Anxious Generation

How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness

BY JONATHAN HAIDT · PENGUIN PRESS © 2024 · 400 PAGES

"This book tells the story of what happened to the generation born after 1995, popularly known as Gen Z, the generation that follows the millennials (born 1981 to 1995). Some marketers tell us that Gen Z ends with the birth year 2010 or so, and they offer the name Gen Alpha for the children born after that, but I don't think Gen Z—the anxious generation—will have an end date until we change the conditions of childhood that are making young people so anxious. ...

Adults in Gen X and prior generations have not experienced much of a rise in clinical depression or anxiety since 2010, but many of us have become more frazzled, scattered, and exhausted by our new technologies and their incessant interruptions and distractions. As generative AI enables the production of super-realistic and fabricated photographs, videos, and news stories, life online is likely to get far more confusing. It doesn't have to be that way; we can regain control of our own minds.

This book is not just for parents, teachers, and others who care for or about children. It is for anyone who wants to understand how the most rapid rewiring of human relationships and consciousness in human history has made it harder for all of us to think, focus, forget ourselves enough to care about others, and build close relationships.

The Anxious Generation is a book about how to reclaim human life for human beings in all generations."

~ Jonathan Haidt from *The Anxious Generation*

Jonathan Haidt is one of the world's leading scholars on the psychology of morality and politics. He's also one of my favorite thinkers on the planet.

His blend of practical, scientifically-grounded wisdom combined with his intellectual rigor (and intellectual humility) is deeply inspiring.

As I mentioned in the Notes on *The Righteous Mind* and *The Coddling of the American Mind*, during one of my micro-sabbaticals in which I unplugged from inputs and went DEEP, I decided to spend a week hanging out with Professor Haidt. I read this book and the two I just mentioned. All of which are FANTASTIC.

Each of them were *also* incredibly thought-provoking and humbling explorations of some of the fundamental questions of humanity. *The Righteous Mind* explores the question *"Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion"* while *The Coddling of the American Mind* explores the question of *"How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas Are Setting Up a Generation for Failure."*

This book explores the question of *"How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness."* (Get a copy here.)

> "Sherry Turkle wrote in 2015 about life with smartphones,' We are forever elsewhere.' This is a profound transformation of human consciousness and relationships, and it occurred, for American teens, between 2010 and 2015. This is the birth of the phone-based childhood. It marks the definitive end of the play-based childhood."
>
> ~ Jonathan Haidt

> "People don't get depressed when they face threats collectively; they get depressed when they feel isolated, lonely, or useless. … This is what the Great Rewiring did to Gen Z."
>
> ~ Jonathan Haidt

> "We are overprotecting our children in the real world while underprotecting them online. If we really want to keep our children safe, we should delay their entry into the virtual world and send them out to play in the real world instead."
>
> ~ Jonathan Haidt

As you'd expect, this book is packed with Big Ideas and I'm excited to share some of my favorites so let's jump straight in!

P.S. Learn more: AnxiousGeneration.com, JonathanHaidt.com, and the Substack *After Babel*.

P.P.S. Another book related to serving the next generation we recently featured that I think you'll enjoy is called *10 to 25: The Science of Motivating Young People* by David Yeager.

And: Check out our Notes on Georgia Ede, MD's book *Change Your Diet, Change Your Mind: A Powerful Plan to Improve Mood, Overcome Anxiety, and Protect Memory for a Lifetime of Optimal Mental Health* for more on the impact of NUTRITION on our mental health. Dr. Ede was a college counselor at elite universities and tells us about the importance of "nutritional psychiatry"—a facet of mental health that is rarely discussed but extraordinarily powerful.

THE SURGE OF SUFFERING

"You can see a sudden and very large upturn in major depressive episodes, beginning around 2012. (In Figure 1.1, and in most of the graphs to follow, I have added a shaded area to make it easy for you to judge whether or not something changed between 2010 and 2015, which is the period I call 'The Great Rewiring.') The increase for girls was much larger than the increase for boys in absolute terms (the number of additional cases since 2010), and a hockey stick shape jumps out more clearly. However, boys started at a lower level than girls, so in relative terms (the percent change since 2010, which I'll always use as the baseline), the increases were similar for both sexes—roughly 150%. In other words, depression became roughly two and a half times more prevalent. The increases happened across all races and social classes. The data for 2020 was collected partly before and partly after COVID shutdowns, and by then one out of every four American teen girls had experienced a major depressive episode in the previous year. You can also see that things get worse in 2021; the lines tilt steeply upward after 2020. But the great majority of the rise was in place before the COVID pandemic."

The book has four parts.

Part I of the book is called "The Tidal Wave." The first (and only!) chapter in that first part is called "The Surge of Suffering." That passage is from that first chapter.

As Jonathan points out, the graph in the book has a HOCKEY STICK-shaped growth in the percent of teenage girls who had at least one major depressive episode in the prior year. That steep increase occurs between 2010 and 2014.

Jonathan makes the case that "The Great Rewiring" occurred precisely during that time.

A few pages later he says: *"With so many new and exciting virtual activities, many adolescents (and adults) lost the ability to be fully present with the people around them, which changed social life for everyone, even for the small minority who did not use these platforms. That is why I refer to the period from 2010 to 2015 as the Great Rewiring of Childhood. Social patterns, role models, emotions, physical activity, and even sleep patterns were fundamentally recast, for adolescents, over the course of just five years. The daily life, consciousness, and social relationships of 13-year-olds with iPhones in 2013 (who were born in 2000) were profoundly different from those of 13-year-olds with flip phones in 2007 (who were born in 1994)."*

After making a compelling case for the "Great Rewiring of Childhood" driving the SURGE in suffering among our next generation (while accounting for other potential factors) in Part I of the book, in Part II Jonathan walks us through *"The Backstory: The Decline of the Play-Based Childhood"* then in Part III he walks us through the details of *"The Great Rewiring: The Rise of the Phone-Based Childhood"* before giving us potential solutions in Part IV: *"Collective Action for Healthier Childhood."*

P.S. Before we move on, I want to share a quote from Dr. Georgia Ede's *Change Your Diet, Change Your Mind* to make sure we're all EYES WIDE OPEN about the extraordinary scope of the challenges we face and the urgent need to create solutions.

Ede tells us: "*We're in the midst of a global mental health crisis. Nearly one billion people are living with a mental health disorder, including one in five of the world's children and adolescents. Every year, 700,000 people take their own lives, and suicide is now the second leading cause of death among people in their teens and twenties. Depression and anxiety alone cost the global economy nearly three billion dollars a day. And these numbers don't include the countless people with milder health concerns like brain fog, irritability, and joylessness. Psychiatric problems of all kinds are becoming so commonplace that we are beginning to think of poor mental health as normal and inevitable.*"

ONE BILLION people. That number always blows me away and breaks my heart. I repeat: If you or someone you love is struggling with anxiety and/or depression, I believe your NUTRITION *must* be a part of your strategy to conquer those challenges. There's simply no way we can expect to function optimally (physically or psychologically!) if we're getting 60% of our calories from ultraprocessed foods like the average American.

KIDS ARE (INTRINSICALLY!) ANTIFRAGILE

"The complexity of biological interactions among species and social interactions among humans proved to be too much, but a great deal was learned from the multiple failures. For instance, many of the trees they planted to create a rain-forest ecosystem grew rapidly but then fell over before reaching maturity. The designers had not realized that young trees need wind to grow properly. When the wind blows, it bends the tree, which tugs at the roots on the windward side and compresses the wood on the other side. In response, the root system expands to provide a firmer anchor where it is needed, and the compressed wood cells change their structure to become stronger and firmer.

The altered cell structure is called reaction wood, or sometimes stress wood. Trees that are exposed to strong winds early in life become trees that can withstand even stronger winds when fully grown. Conversely, trees that are raised in a protected greenhouse sometimes fall over from their own weight before they reach maturity.

Stress wood is the perfect metaphor for children, who also need to experience frequent stressors in order to become strong adults. The Biosphere trees illustrate the concept of 'antifragility,' a term coined by my NYU colleague Nassim Taleb in his 2012 book, *Antifragile: Things That Gain from Disorder*. Taleb noted that some things, like wineglasses, are fragile. We protect fragile things from shocks and threats because we know they cannot withstand even a gentle challenge, such as being locked over on a dinner table. Other things are resilient, such as a plastic cup, which can withstand being knocked off the table. But resilient objects don't get better from getting dropped; they merely don't get worse.

Taleb coined the word 'antifragile' to describe things that actually need to get knocked over now and then in order to become strong."

That's from the second chapter in Part II. After we explore "What Children Need to Do in Childhood," we take a look at "Discover Mode and the Need for Risky Play."

As we briefly discussed in our last Idea, Jonathan's thesis is that we OVERPROTECT our kids in the real world and UNDERPROTECT them from/in the virtual world. Our "play-based" childhood—during which we learn *extraordinarily* important social skills!—has been replaced by a "phone-based" childhood—during which we both miss out on the free-play learning opportunities while saturating our consciousness in the unhealthy modeling of behaviors by influencers and other strangers. (To state the obvious: That's not a winning combo.)

One of the reasons I love Jonathan and his wisdom so much *might* be influenced by the fact that we *both* focus on the power of antifragility. I'm pretty sure he doesn't have a tattoo of the word on his left forearm, but very few other authors spend any time chatting about this.

He also talks about it in *The Coddling of the American Mind* in which he shares similar wisdom and also says: *"Taleb opens the book with a poetic image that should speak to all parents. He notes that wind extinguishes a candle but energizes a fire. He advises us not to be like candles and not to turn our children into candles: 'You want to be the fire and wish for the wind.'"*

Now... Right after the passage above, Jonathan tells us: *"Well-intentioned parents who try to raise their children in a bubble of satisfaction, protected from frustration, consequences, and negative emotions, may be harming their children. They may be blocking the development of competence, self-control, frustration tolerance, and emotional self-management. Several studies find that such 'coddling' or 'helicopter parenting' is correlated with later anxiety disorders, low self-efficacy (which is the inner confidence that one can do what is needed to reach one's goals), and difficulty adjusting to college.*

Children are intrinsically antifragile, which is why overprotected children are more likely to become adolescents who are stuck in defend mode. In defend mode, they're likely to learn less, have fewer close friends, be more anxious, and experience more pain from ordinary conversations and conflicts."

Before we move on, I want to emphasize the fact (as I did in our Notes on *The Coddling of the American Mind*) that kids (and all of us!) are **INTRINSICALLY** **ANTIFRAGILE**.

In fact, with asterisks for the potential negative impact of *chronic stressors,* we *NEED* STRESSORS to become our best selves. We need the Wisdom to see that "stress can be enhancing" and then we need the Discipline to put that wisdom into practice.

P.S. Although he doesn't use the word "antifragile" in his book *10 to 25*, David Yeager talks about the parenting style that will help your kids activate their potential. The "Protector" style tries to wrap their kids up in bubble wrap—which, as we know, doesn't help. The effective style is what he calls "The Mentor Mindset" in which we hold our kids to high standards WHILE offering them the warmth and wise support to HIT those high standards. Result? Antifragility.

THE OPPORTUNITY COSTS OF CUCKOOS

"In fact, smartphones and other digital devices bring so many interesting experiences to children and adolescents that they cause a serious problem: *They reduce interest in all non-screen based forms of experience.* Smartphones are like the cuckoo bird, which lays its eggs in other birds' nests. The cuckoo egg hatches before the others, and the cuckoo hatchling promptly pushes the other eggs out of the nest in order to commandeer all of the food brought by the unsuspecting mother. Similarly, when a smartphone, tablet, or video game console lands in a child's life, it will push out most other activities, at least partially. The child will spend many hours each day sitting enthralled and motionless (except for one finger) while ignoring everything beyond the screen. (Of course, the same might be true of the parents, as the family sits 'alone together.')

Are screen-based experiences less valuable than real-life flesh-and-blood experiences? When we're talking about children whose brains evolved to expect certain kinds of experiences at certain ages, yes. A resounding yes."

I never knew that about cuckoo birds. Fascinating, eh? And... What a frightening metaphor for the "opportunity costs" of our kids spending most of their waking lives staring at their phones.

In a chapter called "The Four Foundational Harms," Jonathan walks us through what kids lose when they spend as much time as they do immersed in the virtual worlds of their phones—which, for the record, for teens aged 13 to 18, is close to 50 hours per week.

" In Walden, his 1854 reflection on simple living, Henry David Thoreau wrote, 'The cost of a thing is the amount of . . . life which is required to be exchanged for it, immediately or in the long run.' So what was the opportunity cost to children and adolescents when they started spending six, or eight, or perhaps even 16 hours each day interacting with their devices? Might they have exchanged any parts of life that were necessary for healthy human development?"

~ Jonathan Haidt

" The Great Rewiring devastated the social lives of Gen Z by connecting them to everyone in the world and disconnecting them from the people around them."

~ Jonathan Haidt

" Sleep deprivation is extremely well studied, and its effects are far reaching. They include depression, anxiety, irritability, cognitive deficits, poor learning, lower grades, more accidents, and more deaths from accidents."

~ Jonathan Haidt

As CRAZY as 50 hours per week is, even THAT is an "underestimation" as *"a third of teens say they are on one of the major social media sites 'almost constantly.'"*

Here's a SUPER quick look at "The Four Foundational Harms":

HARM #1: SOCIAL DEPRIVATION. Jonathan tells us: *"Children need a lot of time to play with each other face to face, to foster social development."* One of themes he comes back to MOST OFTEN is the importance of in-person "free play." It's REALLY (!) important.

Later he asks: Isn't connecting on Instagram, Snapchat and online video games *"just as good? No. As Jean Twenge has shown, teens who spend more time using social media are more likely to suffer from depression, anxiety, and other disorders."*

HARM #2: SLEEP DEPRIVATION. Jonathan tells us: *"Sleep-deprived teens cannot concentrate, focus, or remember as well as teens who get sufficient sleep."* So, how much do they need? *"Teens need more sleep than adults—at least nine hours a night for preteens and eight hours a night for teens."*

HARM #3: ATTENTION FRAGMENTATION. *"This never-ending stream of interruptions—this constant fragmentation of attention—takes a toll on adolescents' ability to think and may leave permanent marks in their rapidly reconfiguring brains."* Does being a heavy user of smartphones and video games cause ADHD? *"It appears so."*

HARM #4: ADDICTION. Jonathan walks us through the behavioral design hacks that social media sites use to get us "hooked." He references Johann Hari's *Stolen Focus* (see Notes) and tells us *"The creators of these apps use every trick in the psychologists' tool kit to hook users as deeply as slot machines hook gamblers."* Check out our Notes on [Irresistible] and *The Scarcity Brain* for more. And, of course, watch [The Social Dilemma] if you haven't yet!

SPIRITUAL ELEVATION & DEGRADATION

"It matters what we expose ourselves to. On this the ancients universally agree. Here is Buddha: 'We are what we think. All that we are arises with our thoughts.' And here is Marcus Aurelius: 'The things you think about determine the quality of your mind. Your soul takes on the color of your thoughts.'

In a phone-based life, we are exposed to an extraordinary amount of content, much of it chosen by algorithms and pushed to us via notifications that interrupt whatever we were doing. It's too much, and a lot of it pulls us downward on the divinity dimension. If we want to spend most of our lives above zero on that dimension, we need to take back control of our lives."

That's from one of the most powerful chapters called "Spiritual Elevation and Degradation."

Jonathan shares his humanity as he begins the chapter by saying: *"In the previous chapters, I described a great deal of research on harms to children and adolescents caused by the phone-based childhood. But now I'd like to write less as a social scientist than as a fellow human being who has felt overwhelmed, personally and perpetually, since around 2014."*

Then he proceeds to tells us about the sense of "spiritual degradation" he has felt permeate our culture, telling us: *"When people see morally beautiful actions, they feel as though they have been lifted up—elevated on a vertical dimension that can be labeled divinity. When people see morally repulsive actions, they feel as though they have been pulled downward, or degraded. A phone-based life generally pulls people downward."*

Then he outlines SIX "spiritual practices" we can engage in to counter those downward pulls.

These include: 1. Shared Sacredness, 2. Embodiment, 3. Stillness, Silence, and Focus, 4. Transcending the Self, 5. Be Slow to Anger, Quick to Forgive, and 6. Find Awe in Nature.

COLLECTIVE ACTION

"The most common response I get when I say that we need to delay the age at which children get smartphones and social media accounts is 'I agree with you, but it's too late.' It has become so ordinary for 11-year-olds to walk around staring down at their phones, swiping through bottomless feeds, that many people cannot imagine that we could change it if we wanted to. 'That ship has sailed,' they tell me, or 'that train has left the station.' But to me, these transportation metaphors imply that we need to act right away. I've been on airplanes that left the gate and were then called back when a safety issue was discovered. After the *Titanic* sank in 1912, its two sister ships were pulled out of service and modified to make them safer. When new consumer products are found to be dangerous, especially for children, we recall them and keep them off the market until the manufacturer corrects the design.

In 2010, teens, parents, schools, and even tech companies didn't know that smartphones and social media had so many harmful effects. Now we do. In 2010 there was little sign of a mental health crisis. Now it's all around us. We are not helpless, although it often feels that way because smartphones, social media, market forces, and social influences combine to pull us into a trap. Each of us, acting alone, perceives that it's too difficult or costly to do the right thing. But if we can act together, the costs go way down.'"

That's from the final section: "Collective Action for Healthier Childhood" in which Jonathan presents his ideas on how we can solve our current crisis by affecting change within government, tech companies, schools, and as parents. Of course, check out the book for the details.

For now, I want to emphasize the fact that a) We CAN do something; b) It is URGENT that we do so; and c) We can only solve this challenge TOGETHER. I also want to highlight a couple things for EDUCATORS and PARENTS as we're blessed to serve a LOT of you.

Educators: Jonathan CONSTANTLY emphasizes the power of *removing* phones and INCREASING free play. Get the book for more. (Seriously. Get it!) He also says: *"Any school whose leaders say that they care about fostering belonging, community, or mental health, but that hasn't gone phone-free, is standing on a whale, fishing for minnows."*

Parents: Jonathan CONSTANTLY emphasizes the need for LESS protection in the real world and MORE in the virtual world. Get the book for more. (Seriously. Get it!) And: *"If you do one thing... in the real world, it should be to give your children far more unsupervised free play"* and *"in the virtual world, it should be to delay your children's full entry into the phone-based childhood by delaying when you give them their first smartphone (or any 'smart' device)."*

The challenges we face are profound. The need for each of us to humbly yet Heroically stand up and play our roles well have never been greater. Let's do it. For our kids. Together. TODAY.

Brian Johnson,
Heroic Philosopher CEO

About the Author of This Note

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Brian Johnson is the Co-Founder + CEO of Heroic Public Benefit Corporation and the author of *Areté: Activate Your Heroic Potential*. He's 50% Philosopher and 50% CEO and 101% committed to helping create a world in which 51% of humanity is flourishing by the year 2051. Learn more at heroic.us.